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MICHELANGELO

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MICHELANGELO

THE
NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM
1909

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MCMIX

" Nox atra caput tristi circumvolat umbra."

INTRODUCTORY.

MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI died on the 18th of February, 1564. He was nearly ninety years old, and had long outlived his famous contemporaries Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Correggio. His genius was employed almost entirely in the service of the Popes, and they availed themselves of it for every kind of purpose—among others, to build a road from Florence to a marble quarry in the neighbourhood. He left Florence, his native town, and never returned to it after its capture by the Spaniards in 1530 and the overthrow of the patriotic party, for which he cherished an intense and practical sympathy, and settled in Rome for the rest of his life.

His closing days were brightened by two great friendships: one with Tommaso dei Cavalieri, a young Roman of noble birth and extraordinary beauty; the other with Vittoria Colonna, widow of the Marquis of Pescara, general of Charles the Fifth—a saintly lady and a poetess, who died however several years before him.

The circumstances of this poem are taken from a letter written by Tiberio Calcagni, Michelangelo's pupil and secretary, and given in his Life by J. Addington Symonds. Tiberio had just returned from the country, and "walking through Rome to-day I heard from many persons that Messer Michelangelo was ill. Accordingly I went at once to visit him, and although it was raining, I found him out

of doors on foot. When I saw him I said that I did not think it right and seemly for him to be going about in such weather. 'What do you want?' he answered, 'I am ill and cannot find rest anywhere.' The uncertainty of the speech, together with the look and colour of the face, made me feel extremely uneasy about his life. The end may not be just now, but I fear greatly that it cannot be far off."

He died four days later. There were present at his bedside Tommaso dei Cavalieri, Diomede Leoni and Daniele da Volterra; also his two physicians, Federico Donati and Gherardo Fidelissimi of Pistoja.

MICHELANGELO.

THE brooding mists of winter cast a veil
To thwart what scanty light the window gave
With grey monotony; it seemed apiece
With the drear sorrow that oppressed our souls.
For in his narrow room, as cramped and bare
As any prison cell, were gathered three
To greet my lord, before the trumpet-blast
Was blown for his departure. Found he there
Daniele da Volterra, faithful friend;
Tommaso, whom he ever loved the best,—
Nor had the furrows and the frost of time
Robbed his unrivalled beauty. By the bed
I knelt, Tiberio Calcagni; watched
The face and hands more white and motionless
Than his Carrara slabs. He lay so still
Since ever we had met him, fever-mad
And pacing the wet streets with oaths and prayers
Confused and frantic. Children gaped around
And laughed at him. And then Tommaso touched

His shoulder, and his sheltering voice had power
To soothe the frenzy: so we led him home.
Hour after weary hour we waited; then
When Death was nearest, sudden strength returned
Headlong; then ease of limbs and gentle speech.

"My friends"—the words were faint, the sequence sure,—
"I can remember years and years ago
A carnival held in the height of spring
At Florence, and the city moved with mirth.
The breath of colour hovered in the air,
And I was perched upon the terrace-wall
In a high palace garden; saw below
The crowds pass glad with laughter, song, and dance,
More restless than the fretful shifting seas,
More different in manner and in hue
Than all the curious treasures and strange tales
That Ocean holds in secret galleries.
And watching them and pondering, I spied
A company of our gay Florentines
Stroll through the garden with the clash of tongues
And jest and counter-jest they love so well;
And at the head of them the Medici,
Our great Lorenzo, leaning upon one,

The sweetest singer of his minstrel court.
He came towards me fatherly, and said,
'Thou gloomy little hermit of the Arts,
Why sitt'st alone? This day was made for thee.
Lo! where a greybeard frolics in the street,
A challenge to the tardy steps of youth!'
Half-pleased, half-angered—it was ever so,
Honey and gall were mingled in his talk—
I made reply: 'Forgive, Magnificence.
I am so lonely in these multitudes;
I cannot laugh, when I am bid to laugh,
But would have time rather to think thereon,
And watch this measureless diversity,
As men may watch the actors on a stage.'
And he looked not at me, nor at the crowd,
But seemed to gaze over the roofs of Florence
To some blue distance, with the smile that scored
His face with wrinkles, till it shewed more aged
Than any human face,—I've seen him thus
When smooth ambassadors have tempted him
With questions hard to answer. 'Thou dost scorn,'
He said, 'the pretty toys we fling to you
For your distraction. Thou art very wise;
So wise, so young, that I am fearful for thee,
Lest thou awake from dreams to find thy blood

More cold, more sluggish than the painter's oils,
And thy heart harder than the sculptor's stone.
Then when the days are blank, thou wilt arise
To drink the proffer'd draught, wilt find it dry,
Or silted up with refuse, like a spring
Once pure and radiant which the years have parched.
And thou wilt call thy comrades, and behold!
Thou art alone indeed among their graves.
Wherefore, my little sculptor, follow joy,
And love, and laughter,—they and thou are young,—
Though long the chase and though the limbs may lag.
When we are old, and the fresh light is gone,
We live at least in memories; thus we quench
The hunger gnawing at our hearts.—And there
Is matter for a sonnet, my Politian.'
And so he turned from me, and linking arm
With our immortal poet went his way:
But then I did not care to understand.

For lately when we lads were at our task
With pliant clay, canvas and colour-box
To serve our teacher's bidding, did I flout
One Torrigiano, rude and brutish clown,
And laughed at his unskilful workmanship.
'Then will I spoil God's work in thee!' he cried,
And struck me in the face, left such a mark

For my companion all these eighty years.
And I with pain and shame and fury thought:
Behold, my playmates have refused their seer;
Then will I leave their foolery, and take
Art for my mistress, Beauty for my guide,
And live alone beneath a soaring tower
Half-palace and half-temple which my brain
Shall build me. 'Twas but a boy's sulky mood
And indolent refusal to obey
His share in this vague game of hap and chance;
But when his fellows passed the ball to him,
He dropped it idle at his feet.
For this
Have I inverted all my life, and lost
The better part of it. For lack of which
So much I undertook lies rough and raw,
And though the mind was master, yet the hand
Had not the human grip to finish it:
So much more that I wrought is dire and dread,
And like the powerful spirits of the air
Quit of our gentler passions. Raphael,
Whose age scarce sums the third of mine, could catch
With never wavering ease the crown, which toil
Of fourscore years can hardly grant. His grace
Spontaneous glanced, like sunshine in the spring.

And I—since my own labour blinded heart
And understanding—deemed that any work
So facile must be far from Art, and fierce
Branded him charlatan: nor even saw
That his was the fair tree of perfect form;
Its balanced beauty shed a curving shade
On every side, a fount of foliage:
But me the blast of God had struck and seared
For my sick stubbornness, and stripped away
Full half of what I had the strength to be.
And now I know the secret, but too late,
Too late to shew its beam! We vaunt ourselves,
And call us men of wit and men of skill;
We cast a fleeting glare across the earth
To catch its notice. There's a ray more clear,
More warm, and lit for comfortable light
By every woman that is pure of soul,
And simple in her wish to do us good.
Methinks the gift to know this, is the power
To paint Madonnas. Thus I learnt too late.
For when the stress of war ranged up and down
Our Italy,—and first, this mighty city,
This immemorial Rome of ours was doomed
To hideous desolation; Florence next,
Beloved as my own mother, was destroyed

By violence and treachery, and robbed
Of all her comeliness but that of sorrow,—
The change so sudden and so terrible,
The sharp reality, transpierced that net
Of sullen fancy woven round my brain.
Like Bourbon's savage Lutherans they raged
For many days, probing each secret cell,
Breaking each cherished image of my heart,
Crushing its pomp and vanity to dust.
Thus altered I arose, heavy with grief
My own no longer, but of all the world.
And after many tears the solace came.

First, I met thee, Tommaso: thou wast kind
And patient always with the mad old man,
Who spoke thee harshest when he loved thee best.
Oft have I seen a crag of marble hewn
From high Carrara, and have caught at once
The semblance of a statue prisoned there,
That waited but my chisel to break its bars.
So thou,—and that insistent cloak of rock
That cumbered thee was my dead weight of years.
And oh! the blemish of a cruel fate
Nor cunning tool nor purity of stone
Could hope to remedy, or loose thy limbs
To sport with me, as once we might have played,

Had we been boys together in the time
Of carnival when wise Lorenzo ruled
In Florence, and when all the world was young.
Then as to some poor, cloistered monk, whose age
And labour of self-sacrifice have earned
The Vision, which by fasting and by prayer
Comes only: so to me a messenger
From Heaven stooped to cheer the dimming days,
And send me with a new and vivid faith,
More confident to claim the great release.
Daughter of those Colonna, who have drenched
Our streets with blood these many hundred years,
She spoke to me, as never woman's voice
Had breathed on me till then. And strange it seemed
That being old I learnt so new a thing.
Then in a while those tones began to wake
A memory long sleeping in the mind:
Just as a glad companion sings a song
Into one's ear; and after many days
Hearing the tune again, it is unknown
And yet familiar. Thus to her I listened,
Roused by the ordered measure of her words,—
Praise given where it ought, not where it pleased;
The swift and fierce unveiling of the false;
And then the flood of pity swallowing

Sorrow and sin in that humanity,
Which only in a woman's bosom dwells.
Often her discourse merged into a dream.
I traced a picture, Raphael could paint,
Then why not I? A farmstead in the hills
Of Tuscany, and children at their play
With laughter and light voices; at my side
Just such a counsellor to look at them,
And laughing too but softer, turn to me,
To lay her arm about my neck. And then
The vision fled, and rang Lorenzo's word,
'Oh! follow joy and love while they and thou
Are young; when old, 'tis left thee to exist
Remembering; and thus alone assuage
The hunger at thy breast.' Such fantasies
Did oft delight my mind and stab my heart.
O my Vittoria! Thine the triumph won.
This gentle conquest of a human life
Is fairer than Pescara's cruel fame.
Thou shed'st a double ray across my path:
One beam doth search the ages that are gone
With such a wistful longing; one doth point
To where the clouds are breaking at the dawn
Of the mysterious promise thou hast given.
O my Vittoria! I am fain to come.

Our God has made a mighty company,
An order of high knighthood which he grants
In time to all his servants; and its badge
Is Death. Death gives its dignity, demands
Its proud distinction, and the dullest clown
Dead without more perceiving than the ox
Which drags his plough, yet finds the secret word
That no philosopher has ever learnt,
Though with the utmost scope of human mind
He clutches for it.

And this thought I claimed,—
It beckoned to me with a sterile hope,
A kind of haughty vision,—when my task
Was set to build a splendid monument
Worthy of those illustrious Medici.
And since besides the cerements of dull stone
That hold the statue, I must carve away
The trappings of men's souls, I sought to hear
The story of the princes, who had won
Only when they were dead, their destined place
In a poor sculptor's life. And one was famed
A supple courtier, whose elaborate wit
Covered his barren spirit with a robe
As iridescent as the rich attire
Which hid his puny body,—butterfly

Of a few hours he seemed. His comrade, snatched
Like him before his due, was as a moth
That darkling flies, and all the good and fair
It touches on, leaves foul and fit for naught.
So he that prized no honour in the days
Here granted him, came soon and suddenly
To what was needs the end of time for him.
And then before their starved and dwarfish souls
So rudely wakened, opened all at once
The boundless prospect, which we cannot guess,
Which only most impartial Death can spread
Before our wonder. Wherefore I, thus called
By chance to be the last interpreter
Of those who had achieved a plane so far
From ours, forgot in them the murderer,
The profligate, and wrought their human form
Transfigured to the semblance and the shape
Of fine perfection, found in this one thing,—
The knowledge of the larger life beyond.
So with a majesty, that well might seem
At variance with their poor mortality,
I left them pondering: and at their feet
The great eternal powers so old, so tired
Of driving the dim forces of the earth,—
Whose mystery our cramped nature cannot pierce—

For those who drop the curtain of their flesh,
Are stretched unveiled.
This I believe of Death:—
First, the confusion of the change; and then
The burst of understanding more complete.
As when the melody of a shepherd's pipe,
So broken and so void of resonance,
Is swallowed in a mighty organ-peal
Of harmony, that fills the gaps and rolls
The throbbing echoes to their furthest range;
But still the tune's the same: and thus will be
The final revelation, and its shock
Sudden and strong to weld the weakest soul
To gain another misty halting-place
In its astounding travels."
Word by word
His voice sank low and lower, till at length
I—at his pillow kneeling—could alone
Catch the last sentence.
"O my God, thou knowest
How far from thee I wander: for to seek
Beauty of soul is best. Yet this I plead:
Thou mad'st the body also, and its grace
So infinite, its subtle comeliness
I understood, and thought in honouring it

To honour Thee. As for all deeper lore
I come to Thee to learn it. Lord Creator,
Teach me, the least of craftsmen."
Then that sleep,
Which is the guardian of the gates of Death,
Laid hold of him. And courage to perceive
Its stealthy step forsook me; so I went
With Daniele, but Tommaso stayed,
A tranquil presence, watching for the end.